



The Voice of
Adult Learning

Submission to the Review of Approach to Widening Participation in Higher Education in Northern Ireland

AONTAS,
The National Adult Learning Organisation

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About AONTAS

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969. Backed by our robust research and focused community engagement, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We do this work on behalf of our members and adult learners who inform our research and campaigns for social change across the island of Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, AONTAS are a founding member of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning (ALL). We have worked in partnership with other ALL members such as the Forum for Adult Learning NI (FALNI) to build the evidence base for the sector, most notably through the first-ever Northern Ireland Community Education Census (Cobain et al., 2023; AONTAS, 2021).

The submission draws on AONTAS research, and evidence from key statutory and civil society bodies in Northern Ireland to make the case that adult and community education must be formally named, resourced and integrated into Widening Participation in Higher Education strategy. Adult and community education opens pathways to progression in education in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it supports the overarching goals of the Programme for Government (NIE, 2024), including prosperity for all, reducing educational disadvantage, and addressing economic inactivity. If it is supported with clear actions under the forthcoming strategy, this sector can be a critical lever for key government priorities and ensure diverse learners reach their full potential by widening participation in higher education.

Key Recommendations

This submission calls for adult and community education to be formally recognised as a valued and distinct pathway to Northern Ireland's further and higher education system, with parity of esteem in policy, planning and funding. It makes the following eight recommendations:

1. Formally name and **recognise adult and community education as a distinct pathway** into Northern Ireland's higher education ecosystem, with parity of esteem in policy, planning and funding.
2. Advocate for a **sustainable, multi-annual funding model** for community education, moving firmly away from short-term project-based cycles towards funding periods of three to seven years as recommended by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.
3. Implement a **cross-departmental government approach** through formal collaboration between the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities in the planning and delivery of a **coherent adult learning strategy** for Northern Ireland.
4. Develop and resource **flexible progression pathways from community education into further and higher education**, including formally recognised bridging and linkage programmes at Levels 1 to 5 of the Qualifications Framework for Northern Ireland.
5. **Address structural barriers and invest in enabling supports** including on-site childcare, mental health provision, career guidance and accessible drop-in services, as core components of community education provision rather than optional extras.
6. Promote the **recognition of non-traditional qualifications across higher education to widen participation**. Qualifications delivered through voluntary and community sector organisations must be recognised as valid and valued routes into further and higher education. Technical barriers relating to recognition of learning that prevent community education learners from accessing progression routes available to further education college learners should be identified and removed.

7. **Establish a Learner Voice Forum for Northern Ireland.** This will ensure policy reflects lived experience. AONTAS and others on the Alliance for Lifelong Learning are well placed to support and facilitate this structure
8. **Strengthen data collection and cross-departmental sharing** across the Departments for the Economy, Communities, NISRA and the further education sector to track learner journeys from community education into further and higher education, making the contribution of the sector visible and measurable in policy.

Introduction and Background

Adult and community education in Northern Ireland is often delivered through voluntary and community sector organisations that are characterised by trusted relationships, local embeddedness, flexible and non-formal provision, and a capacity to engage those furthest from formal education. Research by AONTAS (Cobain et al., 2022; 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025) and the Learning and Work Institute (Southgate et al., 2021) demonstrates that this sector provides the entry points, enabling supports and progression pathways that statutory provision is structurally unable to reach.

Yet it operates without ringfenced funding, without formal recognition in education policy, and without a place in the governance structures that determine the future of Northern Ireland's skills and education system. This submission argues that rectifying this recognition gap is not a marginal concern but a prerequisite for achieving the goal of widening participation in higher education.

Support for the sector in the forthcoming strategy on widening participation in higher education is crucial. Northern Ireland faces a persistent and deepening challenge in participation in adult learning. The lifelong learning participation rate in Northern Ireland stood at 35%, against a UK average of 42%, and Northern Ireland has consistently recorded the lowest rate of job-related education or training of any UK region (Phipps et al., 2025; Pelan, 2023). The gap between Northern Ireland and the UK average has been widening in recent years, not narrowing, and is set against a broader decline in adult participation across the UK of approximately 10% over recent years (Phipps et al., 2025). Adults in the lowest social grade are 16 percentage points less likely to participate in learning than those in the

highest, and half of those who left school at 16 or earlier have never returned to learning at any point (Phipps et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2024).

These patterns have significant consequences for Northern Ireland's economy and its communities (NI Audit Office, 2024). The OECD Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland (2020) report identified fragmented governance, a weak culture of adult learning and the absence of a coherent, comprehensive adult learning strategy as drivers of underperformance. A subsequent audit by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024) found that, despite £470 million spent on skills and learning over 2023-24, the adult participation rate in education and training had in fact decreased to 16.3% against a target of 25%, and that little progress had been made against the Skills Strategy's core goals. This is compelling evidence that the relying on the formal, institutional skills system alone is insufficient. The complementary infrastructure of community education, which has the capacity to reach over 50,000 people per year in Northern Ireland, must be formally integrated into pathways, recognised in policy and resourced if widening participation in higher education is the goal (Cobain et al., 2023).

Section 1: Community Education as a Pathway to Further and Higher Education

Recommendation 1: Formally name and recognise adult and community education as a distinct component of Northern Ireland's further and higher education system, with parity of esteem in policy, planning and funding across the Department for the Economy, Department for Communities and Department of Education.

The OECD (2025) reports that non-formal adult learning now far exceeds formal adult education in scale across member countries, with 37% of adults engaged in non-formal learning compared to only 8% in formal adult education. This increase is mirrored in Northern Ireland, where 22% of adult learners are now engaging in learning in community contexts, an increase from 18% in previous years (Phipps et al., 2025). This is where adult learning is happening. Policy must follow it.

There is a further stronger rationale for the recognition of learning in community contexts. Participation in further and higher education is strongly shaped by prior educational attainment. Adults who left school at 18 are 20% more likely to engage in learning than

those who left at 16, and those with higher qualifications are significantly more likely to continue learning throughout their lives (Phipps et al., 2025). This represents a cycle of exclusion in which those with the greatest need for education are the least likely to access it through formal routes. Breaking this cycle requires investment in accessible, community-based provision that can reach people where they are and build the confidence, skills and qualifications necessary for progression (Cobain et al., 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

The AONTAS Northern Ireland Community Education Census (Cobain et al., 2023) documented 60 community education organisations delivering almost 800 courses to over 50,000 people during the 2021 to 2022 academic year alone. These organisations provide accredited and non-accredited learning at Levels 1 to 3 of the Qualifications Framework, functioning in practice as informal bridging and linkage partners for the further and higher education system. Learners reported significant gains in confidence and self-esteem that opened doors to further learning (Cobain et al., 2023).

Northern Ireland's previous strategy, *Access to Success* (Department for the Economy, 2012), explicitly acknowledged further education and community pathways as routes into higher education and established partnership structures between higher education institutions, further education colleges and community organisations to deliver on this vision. This commitment has not been supported with adequate resourcing, so this submission calls for *Access to Success*'s intentions to be revived and realised through formal progression pathway frameworks that connect adult and community education into the further and higher education system.

To support this recognition, a clear policy framework is needed to support the role of the sector, and ensure that its particular qualities, and practices are protected and promoted as part of the wider education ecosystem. The development of an Adult Learning Strategy is long overdue and is needed to ensure that adult and community education is integrated into progression pathways (NI Audit Office, 2024; Cobain & Neilands, 2025; Cobain & Jackson, 2025). Learning from the republic suggests that having policies in place, such as the Community Education Framework (SOLAS, 2024) are key to recognition, visibility and legitimacy for the sector, which precedes partnerships and collaboration to achieve policy goals (Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

Section 2: Addressing Economic Inactivity and Social Exclusion

Recommendation 2: Move firmly away from year-to-year, project-based funding towards multi-annual cycles of three to seven years. This is the minimum necessary to enable community education organisations to plan, retain staff, build progression partnerships with further and higher education institutions, and deliver consistent outcomes for learners.

Recommendation 3: A joint strategy involving the Department for the Economy, and the Department for Communities is required to fund and govern the sector coherently as adult and community education spans economic activation, community development, health and wellbeing.

Recent reports (O'Neill, 2025; Pivotal, 2025) documented that the voluntary and community sector organisations currently at risk of losing funding due to the reduction of the Local Growth Fund are the primary providers of support for those with the most complex barriers to participation in learning and employment, including addiction, trauma, disability, domestic abuse, criminal justice involvement, rural isolation and fear of losing benefits. This finding is significant as economic inactivity is one of the most persistent and complex challenges facing Northern Ireland. The OECD (2020) identified economic inactivity rates that remain among the highest in comparable regions, with skills imbalances, ill health, caring responsibilities and the legacy of conflict all contributing factors.

The UK Government's decision to reduce annual revenue funding of the Local Growth Fund from £25 million to £9.2 million from April 2026 represents a 64% cut to a funding stream that supported 23,942 beneficiaries across 15 projects, 12 of which were led or co-delivered by voluntary and community sector organisations employing 650 staff (O'Neill, 2025). The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's research (Hepburn et al., 2025) found that the earlier transition from European Social Fund to UK Shared Prosperity Fund had already caused funding reductions of up to 50% for equality-focused organisations, the loss of experienced staff and a forced narrowing of provision from broad social inclusion to the narrower criterion of economic activation.

Meanwhile, the NI Audit Office (2024) found that NI has spent approximately £470 million annually on skills and learning while failing to meet its own participation targets. Investment in the community infrastructure that can reach those who do not and will not engage with formal skills programmes, and that provides the preparation and confidence building that makes formal provision accessible (Pivotal, 2025; Cobain et al., 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025). Cutting this infrastructure while maintaining expenditure on programmes that are not meeting their targets is counterproductive to the goals of increased participation.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (Hepburn et al., 2025) has recommended that any replacement funding model must include multi-annual cycles of three to seven years, optional match funding, greater local autonomy for community partners, and targeted provision for rural and equality-focused organisations. These recommendations, grounded in evidence from organisations across Northern Ireland, represent the minimum baseline for a funding model that can support sustainable community education delivery. AONTAS endorses these recommendations in full and urges both the NI Executive and the UK Government to adopt them as the framework for any successor to the Local Growth Fund.

A cross-departmental approach is not optional in this context. The AONTAS NI Census (Cobain et al., 2023) found that community education providers reported up to 11 separate funders, with 50 unique funding sources identified across the sector including six government departments. This fragmentation imposes enormous administrative burdens on organisations with limited capacity, prevents strategic planning, and produces incoherent provision where learners fall between departmental remits. A joint strategy between the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities with a single ringfenced community education budget line is the structural reform that would make sustainable delivery possible.

Section 3: Flexible, Inclusive Provision for Groups Furthest from Education

Recommendation 4: Develop and resource flexible progression pathways, including bridging and linkage programmes between community education and further and higher education at Levels 1 to 5, with dedicated funding for part-time, flexible and community-based delivery. These pathways should be designed in partnership with community education

providers, and higher education partners and embedded across the various recognition of prior learning/ accredited prior learning frameworks.

Recommendation 5: Address structural barriers and invest in enabling supports as core provision. On-site childcare, mental health support, career guidance and accessible drop-in services provided by community education organisations are not optional extras. They are the enablers of participation for learners facing the greatest barriers.

The evidence on who is most underrepresented in lifelong learning in Northern Ireland is consistent and clear. Pelan (2023) documents that only 12.3% of adults aged 25 to 64 with a disability participated in education or training in 2021, compared to 19.0% of those without a disability. Burns, Leitch and Hughes (2015) further found that people with hidden disabilities are more likely to engage with further education than higher education. This finding is replicated in reports from the Republic (SOLAS, 2025) which highlights strong participation rates for people with disabilities in adult learning contexts. This points to the importance of accessible, flexible, community-based provision as the appropriate first point of contact in widening participation in higher education (Cobain et al., 2023; Cobain & Jackson, 2025).

Migrants, including refugee and asylum-seeking communities, also face particular barriers to participation in formal education in Northern Ireland. The AONTAS submission to the Programme for Government (AONTAS, 2024) highlighted the importance of community education as an accessible entry point to education affirmed the value of enabling supports that are responsive to diverse needs as a driver of participation. The current funding model, with its narrow focus on economic activation criteria, is least well suited to supporting these communities' participation in education. Their needs are social, linguistic and relational as well as economic (Meyler et al., 2023).

Women are also disproportionately affected by barriers to participation and are less likely than men to be economically active and more at risk of socio-economic exclusion (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024). For women, the evidence from the AONTAS NI Census (Cobain et al., 2023) on the need for support is particularly focused on childcare. Learners in focus groups described the provision of free or low-cost on-site childcare as the single most

critical enabler of their participation in community education. Many had no other family support available and would have been entirely unable to attend classes without it. Women described knowing their child was cared for in the same building by qualified staff as allowing them to relax into their learning and to experience what they described as precious time for themselves and a chance to reconnect with other adults. This evidence is a direct argument for affordable, accessible childcare to be treated as an integral component of community education funding to support progression in education, not a separate policy concern.

Furthermore, in a post-conflict society, the further education sector in Northern Ireland is often the first environment in which people from different community backgrounds come together in a shared learning space. This gives it a distinctive function in social cohesion that has benefits for widening participation (Irwin, 2019). Community education, operating at the level below further education and in the most local of settings, extends this benefit to those who have not yet taken the step into their educational journey. In doing so, it creates the conditions of trust, belonging and mutual recognition in diverse settings that enable learners from marginalised groups to progress in their educational journey. This social value is not captured in qualification frameworks or employment outcome measures, yet it is foundational to the Programme for Government's (NIE, 2024) objectives of safer communities, social inclusion and wellbeing for all.

Despite this value for communities, people in rural areas face additional barriers of isolation, transport and limited provision. The AONTAS NI Census (Cobain et al., 2023) found that only 8% of community education organisations were based in rural locations, indicating a significant geographical gap in provision. Addressing these disparities requires a deliberate expansion of community-based provision, targeted at underserved groups and locations, in order to reduce structural barriers to participation and ensure that lifelong learning opportunities and progression to higher education is genuinely accessible to those who currently remain furthest from education.

Section 4: Qualifications, Recognition and Progression Structures

Recommendation 6: Promote the recognition of non-traditional qualifications across higher education institutions to widen participation. Qualifications delivered through voluntary and

community sector organisations must be recognised as valid and valued routes into further and higher education. Technical barriers relating to recognition of learning that prevent community learners from accessing progression routes available to learners in adult and community education must be identified and removed.

The Department for the Economy's Skills Barometer (2021 in NI Audit Office, 2024) projects a growing demand for mid and higher-level qualifications over the period to 2030, with forecast average annual undersupply of new workers with qualifications at Level 3 and above. Those with low or no qualifications face the greatest barriers to filling emerging skills shortages, and the NIAO has highlighted that limited progress has been made in increasing qualification levels across the working age population, with the adult learning participation rate declining from 18.2% in 2020 to 16.3% in 2022, against a 2030 target of 25% (NI Audit Office, 2024). Investing in accessible progression options from community education into Level 4 and above is therefore not a marginal policy choice but a direct response to the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy.

The reach of the community-based education sector in terms of providing access to education is evident in AONTAS research (Cobain et al., 2023) and the 800,000 learners engaged across 774 centres in the [Open College Network of NI](#). These learners are engaged in programmes from Level 1 to 5 in accessible local settings, opening a pathway to further education which must be supported and recognised in recognition of learning processes.

Section 5: Governance, Learner Voice and a Collective Advocacy Structure

Recommendation 7: Establish a Learner Voice Forum for Northern Ireland. This will ensure policy reflects lived experience of learners. AONTAS and others on the Alliance for Lifelong Learning are well placed to support and facilitate this structure.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen data collection and sharing to track learner journeys
A shared data framework across the Department for the Economy, NISRA and the further education sector should be developed to track learner journeys from community education through further to higher education. This should incorporate qualitative learner voice data alongside quantitative measures to capture the full range of outcomes community education delivers.

Realising the value of adult and community education in Northern Ireland requires representation from adult and community education learners in key decision-making fora. This will ensure that the sector is recognised in skills reviews, consultations and widening participation strategies. AONTAS has developed a model for structured learner voice participation in the Republic of Ireland through the National FET Learner Forum, which brings together thousands of adult learners to share their experiences and influence policy. Learner voice has proven to be an invaluable tool for reflection on progression through education and quality assurance in further education in the Republic (QQI, 2023; QQI, 2024). And the National FET Learner Forum in particular has been identified as demonstrating good practice in learner participation and influence in adult education (EPALE, 2025).

For this reason, AONTAS, along with other ALL Partners, would be well placed to provide the structured mechanism through which the experiences of adult learners in Northern Ireland could directly inform the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities in the development and review and development of their policies. Learner voice measures can also support the measurement of the impact of adult education and drive the development of the education ecosystem that supports increased access and widened participation for marginalised groups (Cobain & Neiland, 2025).

The issue of capturing data on progression and the impact of adult education is equally significant (Cobain & Neiland, 2025). AONTAS research (Cobain et al., 2023) found that community education providers reported using a wide range of output measures across multiple funders, with no consistent framework for capturing the deeper and longer-term impacts of participation. The sector, as the NI Audit Office (2024) also observed of the wider skills system, is focused on counting outputs such as course completions and attendance figures. This does not fully capture the progression and social outcomes that justify investment. A shared data framework, developed collaboratively between the Department for the Economy, Department of Communities, NISRA and community education providers, that is supplemented by qualitative learner voice evidence, would make the contribution of the sector to progression in education visible in a way that supports both advocacy and accountability.

Section 6: North-South Dimensions and the Shared Island Opportunity

AONTAS are an all-island organisation and brings a distinctive perspective on the potential for North-South collaboration in adult and community education. Article 11 of the Windsor Framework commits both the UK and the EU to maintain the necessary conditions for continued North-South cooperation, including in education (Windsor Framework, Article 11). The twenty-eighth North-South Ministerial Council Education meeting, held in Monaghan in January 2026, reaffirmed this commitment at the highest political level (NSMC, 2026). The PEACEPLUS programme (2021 to 2027) has already demonstrated what structured cross-border collaboration can achieve, with projects such as North South ESTEEM, CO LAB and InsightLink working respectively to strengthen cross-border education and skills mobility, tackle social exclusion and poverty through government collaboration, and build shared knowledge infrastructure for the voluntary and community sector across the island of Ireland (SEUPB, 2025).

There are also examples of cross-border projects from AONTAS research (Cobain & Jackson, 2025) show the potential for the extension of community-to-higher-education progression pathways beyond the boundaries of Northern Ireland. The Rural Community Network NI currently delivers a Level 7 Diploma in Community Development Practice accredited by the University of Galway, demonstrating the potential of structured collaboration between community organisations and higher education institutions in a Northern Ireland context (Cobain & Jackson, 2025). In addition to this example, the PEACE PLUS North South ESTEEM project, Atlantic Technological University, Ulster University, Northwest Regional College and Donegal ETB are jointly working to simplify and strengthen cross-border education and employment mobility (SEUPB, 2025). These examples show that community-to-higher-education pathways are achievable and effective if resourced and supported.

A Northern Ireland Adult Learning Strategy should explicitly plan for cross border collaboration between further and higher education providers, building on existing partnerships and the Shared Island Civic Fund's investment in cross-border civic collaboration to widen participation in higher education.

AONTAS' all-island reach means it is well positioned to facilitate this North-South dimension, supporting NI community education providers to access cross-border partnership

opportunities, share practice and engage with the governance structures of both jurisdictions. This is consistent with the objectives of the Good Friday Agreement and the Windsor Framework and represents a concrete expression of the Shared Island agenda in the domain of lifelong learning.

Conclusion

Adult and community education in Northern Ireland is not a marginal or supplementary concern. It is a foundational layer of the education and skills system that can reach over 50,000 people per year, delivers accredited qualifications, builds progression pathways, provides enabling supports for the most vulnerable learners, and contributes to social cohesion in a post-conflict society. It is also a sector under acute threat, facing the combined pressures of a 64% cut to the Local Growth Fund, a history of short-term and fragmented funding, and the absence of formal recognition in the policy frameworks that govern education and skills in Northern Ireland.

The evidence presented in this submission demonstrates that the formal skills system, despite significant public investment, is not meeting Northern Ireland's participation and attainment targets. Community education, properly recognised and resourced, is not an alternative to formal provision but an essential complement, a trusted, flexible and locally rooted infrastructure through which those furthest from education can take their first step back into learning and begin the journey into further and higher education and the labour market.

AONTAS call on the Northern Ireland Executive, and in particular the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities, to act on the eight recommendations in this submission. To name adult and community education formally in policy. To fund it on a sustainable, multi-annual basis. To connect it structurally to progression pathways into further and higher education. To listen to the learners whose lives it transforms. And to recognise it as the public good it has always been.

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